NEWS — EVENTS

A Cappella Fest is back at Winchester High School

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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The Winchester High School Chamber Singers, along with their teacher Joel Buford, are looking forward to their return A Cappella Fest concert on Feb. 7. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

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It's been five years since Winchester High School has held A Cappella Fest. But this Friday night, the music will flow once again.

A Cappella Fest has been going on every other year since the 1990s. But the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to the concert. In fact, the last A Cappella Fest took place that same February.

WHS Chorus Teacher Joel Buford, right, works with students from the Choral Singers. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

But even after society started to slowly get back to normal, it was difficult to re-start the festival.

"After COVID, we couldn't get colleges to come because they were rebuilding," said chorus teacher Joel Buford. "Last year, when I c

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[from sabbatical], I thought we should ease into it. It's on the [school] calendar and I said 'We should do it this year.'"

Buford said it's a lot of work to put on the show. That's why he gives the students a leadership opportunity to do it themselves as members of the Choir Board — under his guidance, of course.

Winchester High School Chamber Singers practice one of their A Cappella Fest numbers for the Feb. 7 concert. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

For example, Salena Wang and Sadie Kinsey are managing A Cappella Fest, organizing the concert and finding college A Cappella groups to perform on Feb. 7, as well.

"We felt like it was important to bring this back," said Kinsey, who added both she and Wang volunteered to take on the project.

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Priscilla Meyer said it takes a lot of time and effort to put something like the festival together, especially considering students are trying to study for classes and exams at the same time they are rehearsing to bring their music up to “performance level.” That, she said, is the most difficult part.

But it’s also exciting. Bennett Yu, who has been working on publicity for Friday night’s show, said the students have a goal.

“We used to completely fill out the seats and it was standing-room only,” Yu said, of past festivals. “So that’s our goal. For our comeback, we want all the seats to be full!”

Winchester’s a cappella program

On a sunny Monday morning, the Chamber Singers are rehearsing two numbers for the concert, which is four days away: “Rosanna” by Toto and “Happy Together” by The Turtles.

Kazoos are brought out, smiles light up the classroom and Buford gives notes to his choir. Nearby parents Maura Sullivan and Jenny Rappole sit and watch, remembering when their own kids were part of the a cappella and choral program.

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Students in the WHS Chamber Singers work through a number during rehearsals for A Cappella Fest on Feb. 7. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

"It's just a super program," Rappole said, laughing. "[Buford] makes sure everyone has a role in the class and that everyone is involved."

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And, Sullivan adds, it's real-life experience for students when they go into the real world. Take her daughter, Lia Cagnetta, who recently took on a task requiring the skills she learned in Buford's class.

But it's more than that, the program at WHS has grown to the point where there are four choirs, three of which students audition for — Chamber Singers, Bella Voce and Octets — and one that welcomes everyone who wants to join.

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Additionally, Buford holds an afterschool chorus for students who want to sing, but don't have time to fit it into their school schedule.

"These kids are at another level," Rappole said, watching the Chamber Singers. "This program allows kids who might think they might want to do this to join. It's quite a gift. This program allows a diverse group of kids to have a safe and wonderful place to be."

The WHS Chamber Singers rehearse a number for A Cappella Fest, as teacher Joel Buford accompanies them on piano. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

It's still about the fun

Buford came to Winchester in 2007, working at the McCall Middle School and high school at the same time. He then worked full time at the McCall until 2015 when he transferred to WHS.

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Since then, he's created a host of a cappella and choral programs that seem to attract the student population.

"Joel created all these programs," Rappole said. "My son, Will, was a hockey player and Mr. B drew him in and he stayed with it."

Sullivan agreed.

"There are some kids who have turned down AP classes to do this," she said.

Buford said his goal has been to grow the program, to get over all the issues COVID brought with it and now to rebuild.

Asked how he picks the songs for his programs, Buford laughs. He said it's all about the personality of the choir, about letting the kids lead the way.

"I gave them 20 pieces in November and we kept two of them," Buford said.

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Member of the Winchester High School Chamber Singers bring out the kazoos for an A Cappella Fest number on Feb. 7. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Buford added it's definitely a lot of work, but A Cappella Fest gives students an opportunity to take on more pop music as opposed to the more classic choir pieces students perform during other parts of the year.

Buford credited all his students, past and present, with the program's success.

"The kids make it fun," he said. "They are so respectful, so fun, so empathic. They come in and we make good music. They're great kids and they make it easy.

Anya Wickramasinghe, who along with Tommy Barlos, will be emceeing the Feb. 7 event, said the music program is just plain fun.

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"We're more like a team," she said. "It's a way more cooler class than a regular math class!"

WHS Chorus Teacher Joel Buford gives students a few notes during rehearsals on Feb. 3, just fo
Cappella Fest. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO...

A Cappella Fest will take place at the Winchester High School Auditorium, beginning at 7 p.m. Doors open at 6:30 p.m.

The evening of college and high school song features the following: WHS Chamber Singers, Bella Voce, and Octets, Brown University Beauty and the Beats, Fordham University Ramblers, Harvard University Opportunes, MIT Chorallaries, MIT Muses, Wesleyan University Cardinal Sinners.

Tickets available at the door: $15 adult/$10 student and children.

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Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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